Max Weber

THE DOWNTOWN GALLERY

Max Weber

THE FIGURE IN RETROSPECT 1906-1958

EXHIBITION NOVEMBER 11
TO DECEMBER 6, 1958

THE DOWNTOWN GALLERY

32 EAST 51 STREET
NEW YORK, N. Y.

LA PARISIENNE, 1907

THE FIGURE PAINTING OF MAX WEBER

"If you run away from Adam and
Eve, you have no family." MAX WEBER

Recently a national weekly, surveying the American art scene, reported that the figure is coming back. Nervous tremors must be running through many studios as artists debate the question: figurative or non-figurative?

This is indeed the root question. And as the ferment rises, a retrospective exhibition of Max Weber's figure art is most timely and instructive. For Weber has spanned the poles of this dilemma, probing innumerable possibilities of formal experimentation, struggling throughout his career for a creative resolution of the problems that beset the artists of our time, without ever severing his ties with the family of man.

Weber's brush yields a very warm human touch. This quality of the man is already apparent in his early student work, for example the figure study of 1908, done from a model in the class of Henri Matisse in Paris. The young student's trepidation because of the unfinished state of his study at the end of the working week was quickly set at rest by Matisse with the words "C'est jolie." And indeed, half a century later, the inherent beauty of this work, the simple freshness of its soft yellow highlights and violet shadows, is still very moving.

A more impressive measure of the young artist's potential is to be found in another work of about the same period, the "Parisienne." This painting is a remarkable blend of esthetic sophistication and unaffected simplicity of feeling. For many persons, the conception of this reclining nude will call to mind the comparable theme which Modigliani first essayed a number of years later. But this theme, which Modigliani was to make the hallmark of his art, was for Weber no more than a way station in his further development.

In retrospect, the sweet lyric of the "Parisienne," with the unbroken rhythm of its contours, appears like a symbol of an almost paradisiac artistic innocence, painted on the eve of the fall, so to speak—the fall into the maelstrom of troubled, and often tormented, formal experimentation.

A sharp turn toward a much more involved, complex picture-concept is marked by the two versions of "Burlesque," which Weber painted shortly after returning from Paris to New York in 1909. The tortuous rhythms, particularly the second version, contrast strikingly with the soothing contours of the "Parisienne."

A device of compelling attractive power in the second "Burlesque" is the "Egyptian eye," so called by the artist because it is a full-face eye set in a profile, just as in the ancient Egyptian wall paintings. This "Egyptian eye" is no mere trick to jolt the spectator. It is the emotional as well as visual center of the picture, opening wide as if to catch the painter's warm sympathy for his subject.

The two "Burlesques" and "Joel's Cafe" afford an insight into the working of the creative process at a decisive turn in Weber's development. The finished paintings remain close to life, but not to the original impression, which is thoroughly transmuted and fortified in the artist's imagina-

tion. In all these works the elements of style are strongly pointed up.

As Weber's art developed, the concentration on inner esthetic elements became more pronounced. But even in his moments of greatest preoccupation with formal experimentation, he never fell into an arid estheticism devoid of life experience.

Consider, for example the "Composition with Three Figures" of 1910. The artist is absorbed in hewing out figures with the brush, which strikes off sharply faceted planes, as if it were keen as a chisel. But the brush also strikes off a brooding tone, an unmistakably Weber mood.

Or again, note a small but significant detail like the highly stylized eyelashes in the "Reclining Figure" of 1911. These are esthetic refinements which are in no danger of becoming precious because they are swept up in the robust treatment of the figure.

If the style juts out, so to speak, in some of these early canvases, it is a mark of the painter's strength and determination, which he sustained through years of critical abuse and vilification.

With the little oil painting, the "Sabbath," of 1919, we stand at the threshhold of the artist's maturity. The esthetic components are now brought into mutual accord with a far surer touch than in most earlier works. It is almost as if Weber, in turning for the first time to his Jewish background for a theme, had released a strong emotional undercurrent which acted as a powerful solvent, infusing the elements of his art with a new depth of expression. From this point on, the heritage of his forefathers was to be a wellspring of creative stimulus to Weber.

Maturity did not open up a simple straight-line course for Max Weber. He puts it this way: "As a matter of fact, in your life's work, if you are alert, you do not go on one track. You are like a river, there are tributaries."

In the course of half a century Max Weber has explored many tributaries; many explorers have wound up in a morass, but Weber has always managed at a crucial turn to fight free of the perils of esthetic stagnation and make his way back to the mainstream.

Throughout his development, which runs from the figure study done under Matisse in 1908 to the "Figure with Bird" of 1958—a development too intricate to retrace in detail here—the creative problem has never ceased to be deeply challenging to him. In his seventy-eighth year the painter says, "When I stand before a little canvas, it looks as big as the Atlantic Ocean. And I'm going out in a fisherman's dory. It frightens me."

Through all its transformations, from the massive compositions of somnolent women in the twenties, to the turbulent designs of the forties and fifties, such as "Hassidic Dance" and "Music and Dance," Weber's painting remains fraught with the anguish of our time. But it does not succumb to anguish. For it is borne up by a deep-throated lyric, ever more eloquent as the painter's mastery of his craft has reached its climactic level in his late years.

At a time when the crass approach to creative problems is stirring more and more distrust and doubt, this splendid retrospective exhibition should be a heartening experience for all who believe, or would like to believe, in the art of the whole man.

JEROME KLEIN

The Downtown Gallery is deeply grateful to the institutions and private collectors listed, as well as members of the Weber family who have generously lent paintings to this exhibition.

COMPOSITION
WITH
THREE
FIGURES
1910

CATALOG

1	THE YOUNG MODEL	*oil*	32x39	1907
2	LA PARISIENNE	*oil*	39x32	1907
3	NUDE, NATURE CLASS	*oil*	12x22	1908
4	BURLESQUE	*oil*	18x15	1909
5	JOEL'S CAFE	*oil*	22x27	1910
6	SOLOIST AT WANAMAKER'S	*gouache*	18x30	1910
7	COMPOSITION WITH THREE FIGURES	*gouache*	47x23	1910
8	FIGURE STUDY	*oil*	40x24	1911
9	THE FAMILY	*gouache*	18x24	1911
10	TAPESTRY	*oil*	30x40	1913
11	DECORATION WITH RED TABLE	*oil*	22x34	1914
12	FRIENDS	*gouache*	24x18	1916
13	CARD-PLAYERS	*gouache & oil*	18x24	1917
	Collection William H. Lane Foundation			
14	SABBATH	*oil*	10x12	1919
15	CONVERSATION	*oil*	32x42	1919
16	RETIREMENT	*oil*	40x32	1921
17	SKETCH FOR BEAUTIFICATION	*oil*	18x15	1932
	Collection Mrs. Samuel Cauman			

18	THE HAREM	*oil*	30x18	1938
19	THE GUITARIST *Collection I. B. M. Corporation*	*oil*	34x28	1939
20	EXOTIC DANCE	*oil*	40x30	1940
21	MUSIC *Collection Brooklyn Museum*	*oil*	36x30	1940
22	HASSIDIC DANCE *Collection Mr. and Mrs. Milton Lowenthal*	*oil*	40x32	1940
23	REPOSE #1	*oil*	28x23	1943
24	ADORATION OF THE MOON *Collection the Whitney Museum*	*oil*	32x48	1944
25	WIND ORCHESTRA	*oil*	50x40	1945
26	THREE LITERARY GENTLEMEN *Collection William H. Lane Foundation*	*oil*	36x30	1945
27	ACROBATS	*oil*	58x48	1946
28	BEAUTIFICATION *Collection Metropolitan Museum of Art George A. Hearn Fund, 1948*	*oil*	28x23	1947
29	MUSIC AND DANCE	*oil*	36x30	1950
30	DISCOURSE	*oil*	30x25	1951
31	ENTERTAINMENT	*oil*	18x14	1956
32	LEANING FIGURE	*gouache*	24x18	1956
33	FIGURE WITH BIRD	*oil*	20x36	1958

Group of drawings from 1906.

MAX WEBER: BORN 1881

PAINTINGS IN PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Bloomfield Hills, Michigan	CRANBROOK ACADEMY OF ART
Baltimore, Maryland	BALTIMORE MUSEUM OF ART
Cambridge, Massachusetts	FOGG ART MUSEUM
Chicago, Illinois	ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO
	ENCYCLOPAEDIA BRITANNICA
Cleveland, Ohio	CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART
Columbus, Ohio	COLUMBUS GALLERY OF FINE ARTS
Des Moines, Iowa	DES MOINES ART CENTER
Detroit, Michigan	DETROIT INSTITUTE OF ARTS
Fort Worth, Texas	FORT WORTH ART CENTER
Hanover, New Hampshire	DARTMOUTH COLLEGE ART GALLERY
Hartford, Connecticut	WADSWORTH ATHENEUM
Iowa City, Iowa	STATE UNIVERSITY OF IOWA
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La Jolla, California	ART CENTER IN LA JOLLA
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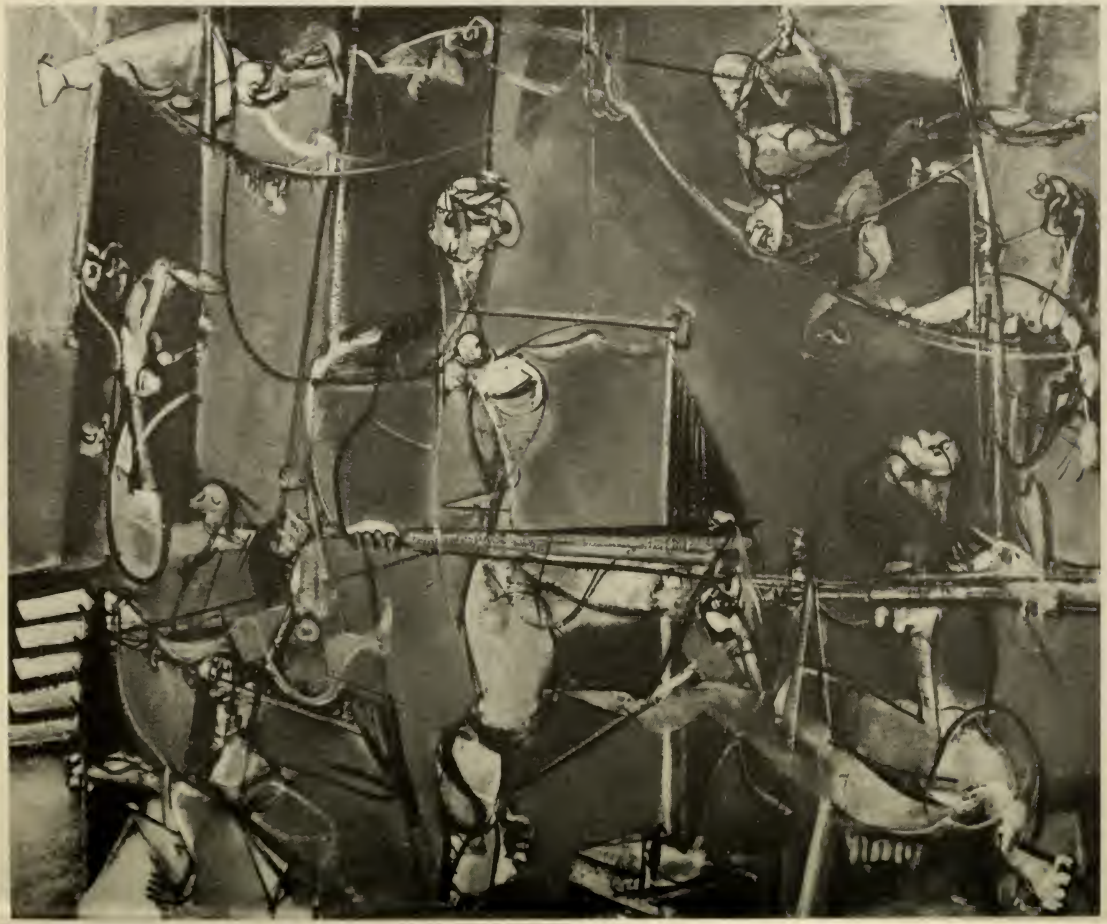
Lincoln, Nebraska	UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA
Los Angeles, California	LOS ANGELES COUNTY MUSEUM
Minneapolis, Minnesota	WALKER ART CENTER
Newark, New Jersey	NEWARK MUSEUM ASSOCIATION
New York, N. Y.	BROOKLYN MUSEUM OF ART
	JEWISH THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
	METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART
	MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
	THE SARAH ROBY FOUNDATION
	WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania	PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania	CARNEGIE INSTITUTE
Poughkeepsie, New York	VASSAR COLLEGE
San Diego, California	FINE ARTS GALLERY OF SAN DIEGO
San Francisco, California	CALIFORNIA PALACE, LEGION OF HONOR
Santa Barbara, California	SANTA BARBARA MUSEUM OF ART
Seattle, Washington	SEATTLE ART MUSEUM
Tel Aviv	TEL AVIV MUSEUM OF ART
Tempe, Arizona	ARIZONA STATE COLLEGE
Utica, New York	MUNSON-WILLIAMS-PROCTOR INSTITUTE
Waltham, Massachusetts	BRANDEIS UNIVERSITY
Washington, D. C.	HOWARD UNIVERSITY
	PHILLIPS GALLERY
West Palm Beach, Florida	NORTON GALLERY OF ART
Wichita, Kansas	WICHITA ART MUSEUM

CONVERSATION, 1919

THE HAREM, 1938

MUSIC, 1940



ACROBATS, 1946

DISCOURSE, 1951

LEANING

FIGURE

1956

THE DOWNTOWN GALLERY

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